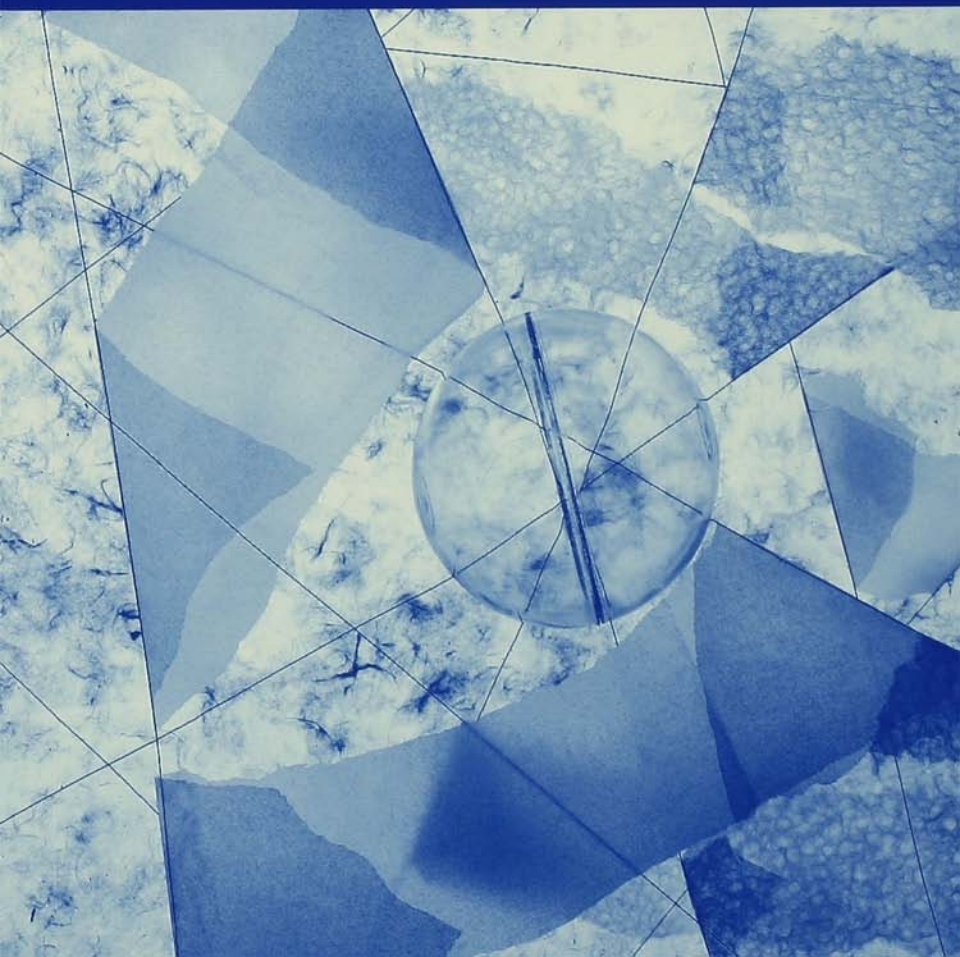


PSYCHO-ANALYTIC INSIGHT AND RELATIONSHIPS

A KLEINIAN APPROACH

Isca Salzberger-Wittenberg



Psycho-Analytic Insight and Relationships

A Kleinian Approach
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I.S.-W.

Introduction

The purpose of this book is to indicate some of the ways in which Sigmund Freud's psycho-analytic theories as developed further by Melanie Klein, can help social workers in understanding their clients and their relationships with them.

There are at least two ways of setting about this task. One is to state the theory first and then see which parts of it are most relevant to social work. Alternatively, we might take the caseworker-client relationship as our starting point, examine it in the light of insights gained in the field of psycho-analysis and study the theory subsequently. The second approach is the one that I have chosen. I have not adhered rigidly to it, however, and case material will often be found interspersed with theory and vice versa.

Psycho-analysis is still a very young science and our present knowledge of the complex working of the mind is limited and in need of constant testing and further development. There are those who oppose or disregard the findings of psycho-analysis altogether, and there are different schools of thought within the psycho-analytic field. The theories here presented are the ones that seem to me, within the limitations of our present knowledge, to best fit the phenomena they try to explain and to make clinical sense. Theories are, after all, only attempts at explaining a set of phenomena and they are valuable in so far as they appear to fit the facts and are helpful in practice. My endeavour is to do no more than to show how they have been arrived at and to put them forward in a way that I hope will be comprehensible to an intelligent and open-minded reader. No previous knowledge of psycho-analytic terms will be assumed.

The term psycho-analysis has two different meanings. It is used to denote: first, a body of knowledge and theories

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about mental and emotional states, and secondly, a particular method of therapeutic treatment. While the insights gained in psycho-analytic practice are of great relevance to other disciplines especially in the educational, medical and social field, the psycho-analytic method clearly is not. It is the task of each profession to work out in which way they can most usefully and appropriately apply the insights first gained from the psycho-analytic study of the personality.

To apply one field of study to another requires either an intimate knowledge of both, or co-operation between representatives of the two disciplines. Although my training in Kleinian psycho-analysis and child psychotherapy was preceded by one in social science and casework, my experience of field work was inadequate for the purpose. I felt the need to learn from social workers, and to explore the relevance of psycho-analytic insights in social work in a dialogue with them. A small group of experienced caseworkers drawn from different fields was therefore invited to meet me for discussions about their cases and those of their students. The examples and problems they brought, my thoughts about these and our joint discussions, together with my psycho-analytic knowledge form the basis of this book.

Practically all the case material has been taken from work with individuals. The knowledge gained from detailed study of one person and his relationship with others, helps us in understanding the more complex interactions within groups. Although the application to group and community situations has not been spelt out in any detail, it is hoped that the psycho-analytic insights to be discussed will be seen to be relevant in this area of work also.

The book is divided into three parts. In Section I, we shall look at some of the feelings with which client and caseworker approach their relationship and at such concepts as transference, the importance of phantasy and the

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inherent conflict between love and hate. In Section II we shall study different kinds of anxieties, and defences against them, and the way these, and envy, affect our relationships. I shall try to indicate how Melanie Klein's work derives from Sigmund Freud's and Karl Abraham's and take into consideration some of the contributions to our understanding made by the present generation of Kleinian psycho-analysts. In Section III we shall consider factors which facilitate the caseworker's understanding of the client and make the relationship therapeutic. We shall also discuss some of the emotional burdens and pressures to which social workers are exposed.

I am very aware of the limitations of this book and know that many important subjects have been inadequately covered or been left out altogether. It is hoped that the book will be a stimulation to further reading and lead caseworkers to consider their experience in the light of what we have discussed and so gain insights on the basis of their own experience.

I
Aspects of a relationship

1

Feelings the caseworker brings to the relationship with the client

Although we have to use shorthand terms like 'caseworker' and 'client', I am always thinking of people or a particular person needing help and a particular individual offering help. For the sake of clarity, I shall refer to the caseworker as 'she' and the client as 'he' except where I give case material, and there the sex of the actual person will be indicated.

The first meeting of caseworker and client is a new experience for both; they come together eager, though in different ways, to find out about each other. Although it is a new experience, their relationship and particularly their initial contact, will be greatly influenced by the attitude each partner brings to the situation.

It is important for the caseworker to be aware of her feelings so that they do not stand in the way of her really getting to know her client as an individual. Otherwise she may be so preoccupied by her eagerness to be helpful, by what her supervisor or Head of Department will say, or busy proving to herself how successful she is, that these considerations overshadow the interview and distort her perception and reactions. If these feelings can be worked over beforehand and kept in check if they occur during the interview, the worker will be freer to observe and take

ASPECTS OF A RELATIONSHIP

in what is going on here and now. The worker must also rid herself of preconceived notions about her client from one interview to the next. Every time is a new beginning, and while there is shared knowledge and experience, the worker needs to be free to see her client afresh, to allow another facet of her client's personality to come forward and permit change and development.

The expectations and fears the caseworker may have are innumerable, and depend on the particular caseworker's personality and experience as well as on the nature of the problem she is faced with. I can only mention a few common ones which I have come across.

Hopeful expectations of the caseworker

To be a helpful parent

Most caseworkers set out to be helpful and see themselves in a good parental role, *vis-à-vis* their client. Their wish to engage in social work may spring from a deep desire to repair situations and relationships but in order to achieve this aim, reparative zeal must be geared to what is realistic and of benefit to the client. 'Do-gooder' is now a term of insult, conjuring up a picture of someone rushing in, impatient to show how much good she can do, without full consideration of the needs of the person requiring help. In this extreme form it may sound ridiculous, but there is a danger, especially for the beginner, to have to *prove* to the client (and in the back of her mind to herself) that she is helpful. The need to reassure herself that she is doing something of value may drive the caseworker to give advice when she is not yet fully in possession of the facts, nor able to judge what receiving advice may mean to the client. Or she may intervene very actively in his life without defining the limits of her role and in this way mislead her client into believing that she will take on a full and active parental role rather than a professional one. The caseworker must be clear in her own mind what

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she can realistically offer, bearing in mind her caseload and what she can expect of herself.

To be tolerant

Because of her wish to be a helpful parent to her client, the caseworker may entertain an expectation of herself being kind, gentle and tolerant. These qualities are certainly desirable in someone entrusted with the confidence and care of human beings in need of help. But too often gentleness, kindness and tolerance, are not distinguished from an attitude which comes close to appeasing or colluding with the client's aggressive feelings and behaviour. We need to distinguish between tolerance based on the ability to acknowledge the client's feelings and being able to bear them, and being so frightened of the client's hostile behaviour and negative feelings that they have to be glossed over or excused in some way. The caseworker in the latter instance is implicitly communicating to the client: this is too bad to be acknowledged, therefore let us ignore it, call it something else or pretend it is not there. Clearly this is not tolerant at all, and the client will understand that the worker cannot stand hostility, depression, despair. If the caseworker cannot, how can the client?

Here is an example: Mrs X cancelled three appointments with a psychiatric social worker. On every occasion she offered an explanation. Once she said she missed the train, another time she did not feel very well; on the third occasion she forgot. Today she phones half an hour after she was due to come, and talks non-stop for five minutes saying that she just couldn't make it, she was going to come but decided to wait for the bread-van to call. The delivery was late and she tried to get a bus and missed the train. The caseworker sympathized with Mrs X's difficulties in having such a long way to come and asked whether she could expect her next week, offering a choice of time: Mrs X is evasive, says she will see, hopes

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she can make it. The worker leaves it at that. Mrs X does not come next week. Nor does she ring or write.

It is true that the caseworker was sympathetic, recognizing the external difficulties, but was she dealing with the client's feelings? No one mentioned that part of Mrs X did not want to come to the interview and that external factors were used to express inner reasons for staying away. Was the caseworker not evading the dilemma of the client who could not bring herself to the interview because she was in a state of conflict? Some verbal recognition of the difficulties, internal as well as external, might have given the client some trust in the worker's ability to understand her conflicted self and so perhaps enabled her to come. But suppose the client decided to stop treatment altogether. It would have been such a relief for her to be helped to say that she did not want to come and to experience the worker as one able to tolerate this. Otherwise she may be left with such guilt feelings at having rejected the 'kind' worker that she may find it impossible to return later when she may be more motivated to seek help.

Some caseworkers feel so guilty about losing a client that they sometimes hang on to him under any circumstances. The adult client has a share in the responsibility for his treatment and the freedom to break it off when he wants to. The caseworker might also remind herself that there are more people wanting to get help than staff to deal with them. (These considerations of course do not apply where there is a statutory obligation to keep up a contact with a caseworker such as in Probation or certain Child Care cases.)

To be understanding

By virtue of her training and experience the caseworker may feel justified in feeling that she has knowledge about human relationships which will help her in understanding her client. She needs to guard, however, against a sense

FEELINGS THE CASEWORKER BRINGS TO THE RELATIONSHIP

of omniscience and superiority in relation to other human beings. Acquaintance with theories about human beings does not give a key to understanding people but tends to remain unintegrated and to be applied indiscriminately unless such knowledge has become part of one's living experience. Clients are not embodied theories. They are human beings, each with their own complicated and unique personality though they have basic patterns of relationships similar to others.

Here is an example of the danger of applying knowledge indiscriminately. A medical social worker was dealing with a case of encopresis in a boy of seven. In taking the social history she learnt that the mother of the boy had recently started a part-time job. At once she was convinced that this accounted for the boy's encopresis, that he was deprived and insecure because of his mother's absence. In vain the mother tried to explain that she was always at home when the child returned from school, nor did she work in school holidays. The fact that the mother worked was *ipso facto* interpreted as deprivation and as the reason for the child's illness. This prevented the worker from looking for deeper causes for the child's complaint.

There are two separate misconceptions here: first, that in every case it is wrong and harmful for the child's mother to work; secondly, that the cause of an emotional disturbance lies invariably in the parent. There are two partners to every relationship and all we know at the beginning is that something has gone wrong in the delicate interaction between them. We cannot say what or why until we know much more about each of the partners and the way they interact. Theories are formulated to help us organize our thoughts about the interaction between people and the different parts within the personality, but in no two persons are the manifestations and constellations exactly the same. Each case provides us with an opportunity to discover something new.

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The caseworker's fears

Let us now look at some of the fears which beset the caseworker meeting her client. Some anxieties are part and parcel of the price we pay for engaging in such responsible work; for the beginner there is the additional guilt of knowing that the client will credit her with authority and knowledge by virtue of her holding a position in the agency. Will she be able to understand the client's feelings? Will she not do harm to her client? If she allows herself to be receptive will she be invaded by the problems put before her, overwhelmed like the client by depression or fear? How is she to cope with silences in an interview? None of these anxieties can be lightly dismissed. The fact that they are experienced shows that the student is in touch with her feelings and trying to deal with them. Supervision is essential, not to do away with such anxieties but to afford a check on whether the caseworker's own problems are interfering and distorting the work process.

There is room only to take up three of the fears I have often come across, while some others will be dealt with in Section III. Students sometimes express a fear that in exploring their client's feelings, they are 'digging into' and 'doing harm'. Related to this is the notion that psychological insight means looking 'with X-ray eyes' into someone's mind. Each of these statements denotes an aggressive act, something like forcing one's way into the other person without his knowledge, against his wishes and interest. This is not the place to go into the childhood sources of such anxieties. This will be discussed in Section II. Here I want to question these assumptions.

Probing and digging into the past

Casework students sometimes say that they do not like 'probing' and 'digging into' the client's past. Indeed, they would be wrong to attempt to do so. I think that the